# An Integrative Literature Review on English Teachers as Agents of Change

## Una revisión integral de la literatura sobre los docentes de inglés como agentes de cambio

**Lina Betancurt**
**Liliana del Pilar Gallego**
Universidad de Caldas, Manizales, Colombia

In this article, we attempt to understand English teachers' perceptions, practices, and challenges concerning social agency through an integrative literature review to build and draw an interpretative framework and generate new knowledge. To achieve this, 58 empirical studies published in a period of seventeen years—2006 to 2023—were selected from the Scopus and Web of Science databases. Results showed that English language teachers' perceptions of agency were closely related to structural factors. Practices such as interactions with communities and humanistic approaches can make agency meaningful. Challenges in agency were more related to collective agency and reflections. In conclusion, English teachers' agentic actions are not dampened by structural factors; on the contrary, this review confirms the potential of English educators to transform education.

*Keywords:* English language teachers, social change, social competence, teacher agency

En este artículo, se pretende profundizar en las percepciones, prácticas y retos relacionados con la agencia social de los docentes de inglés mediante una revisión bibliográfica integral para elaborar un marco interpretativo y generar conocimiento. Se revisaron 58 estudios en Scopus y Web of Science, publicados entre 2006 y 2023. Los resultados indicaron que las percepciones de los docentes sobre la agencia están influenciadas por factores estructurales. Las prácticas como la interacción con las comunidades y la adopción de enfoques humanísticos confieren sentido a la agencia. Los retos identificados se relacionaron con la agencia colectiva y las reflexiones. Finalmente, se destaca que, aunque la agencia docente puede estar condicionada por factores estructurales, no está determinada por ellos. Antes bien, se confirma el potencial de los docentes para transformar la educación.

*Palabras clave:* agencia docente, cambio social, competencia social, docentes de inglés

Lina Betancurt ⬤ https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3264-3081 • Email: lina.betancurt28163@ucaldas.edu.co
Liliana del Pilar Gallego ⬤ https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5300-0213 • Email: liliana.gallego@ucaldas.edu.co

## Introduction

Teaching English from a critical pedagogical perspective has recently been a significant topic worldwide. In this regard, English language teachers play a crucial role in implementing successful educational transformations as real agents of change (van der Heijden, Geldens et al., 2015). Teachers as agents of change could be defined as "skilled teachers who have an inner lead to learn and transform education, both individually and with their colleagues" (van der Heijden, Beijaard, et al., 2018, p. 348). According to Pantić (2017), teachers define agency as a part of their role when helping students adapt to the institutional structures and relationships with the community in general, as well as participation in decision-making. In essence, teachers' agency is a central component of language, planning, and policy, understood as the teachers' ability to act concerning power structures (Liu et al., 2020).

Despite the growing interest in teacher agency in recent years (Balyer & Özcan, 2020; Fu & Weng, 2023; Miller & Gkonou, 2018), few studies have concentrated on English teachers' enactment of pedagogical decisions and the challenges they face when exercising agentic actions. The existing literature has mainly focused on language policies and educational reforms instead; however, more research is needed to empower English teachers as agents of change (Weng et al., 2019; Wu, 2022). English teachers need to be informed about the contributions other language teachers have made despite their structural limitations, holding the language as a possibility for constructing engagement with students of diverse contexts and being situated as powerful social agents (Palmer & Martínez, 2013). Besides, English language teachers' reflections and meaningful practices to exercise agency may motivate other teachers to think, plan, and practice agentic actions in diverse classroom environments (Varghese & Snyder, 2018).

Despite increasing language policies that regard the teaching of English as a means to economic development, English teachers endeavor to understand their role as agents of change, look for ways to strengthen their professional responsibility, and acknowledge their potential to create equitable learning environments for social justice (Barahona & Toledo-Sandoval, 2022; Limbada & Kajee, 2020).

However, the role of language teachers as dynamic agents in decision-making policies has not been taken seriously, so few studies have examined how teachers perceive and adapt policies to their practices to act agentively, even when elements such as structural issues, testing policies, lack of resources, and local community values constrain their agency (Flynn & Curdt-Christiansen, 2018; Fogle & Moser, 2017; Tarnanen & Palviainen, 2018). Therefore, this review aims to dig into English teachers' perceptions and practices and the challenges faced when becoming agents of change. Thus, the paper will attempt to answer the following guiding questions:

1. What are the English teachers' perceptions of their role as agents of change?
2. What practices are English teachers performing to develop agency?
3. What challenges do English teachers face to become agents of change?

## Conceptual Framework

Kayi-Aydar (2015) considers agency strongly associated with the contextual factors within which it is achieved, not just with an individual's ability. In essence, people do not exercise agency individually; indeed, many of their attempts are done by working with others (Bandura, 2000). Building upon the idea of agency as a sociocultural construct, Weng et al. (2019) assert that agency is not only the product of personal beliefs but also an exercise of social interactions. Teachers are agents of change in society; therefore, their participation is fundamental for social change (Ruiz Ortega, 2022).

English teachers as agents of change with cultural-historic knowledge should see their role as developers of skills for learning for life (Cross, 2010). English teachers'

agency implies "not only content knowledge, but also a great understanding about the students, culture, cultural differences, and culturally significant pedagogies" (Fu & Weng, 2023, p. 17).

Having arrived at a considerable definition of teacher agency, it is also important to view English language teachers' roles from a positive perspective (Ishihara et al., 2018). English teachers today exhibit actively negotiated agency despite the structural constraints and are aware of their sociocultural, institutional, and instructional contexts. According to Leal and Crookes (2018), English teachers with a sense of social involvement may achieve positive change because they make more than they think. More recently, Foley et al. (2022) found that some preservice English teachers seek opportunities to foster the students' language learning by displaying a sensitive awareness of their cultural background. Finally, reflections on practices can help English teachers take a critical stance on their professional competence and enrich their understanding as agents of change (Leijen et al., 2020).

### Method

This integrative literature review attempted to identify English teachers' perceptions, practices, and challenges as agents of change. During the initial stage, we searched for empirical indexed articles referenced in Scopus and Web of Science in the last seventeen years (starting in 2006), and using as keywords "English teachers," "teacher agency," "social change," and "social competence." Besides, we applied additional filters related to the subject area based on the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development: research on social sciences (with education as the main sub-area) and applied linguistics. After the search, 77 articles were obtained.

After applying the filters, we sorted out the results based on titles and abstracts and included all the studies on the role of English teachers as social agents. The selected articles focused on both preservice and in-service teachers. Nineteen articles were excluded because they dealt with language policies, critical pedagogies, or methods to teach English. Table 1 summarizes all the criteria followed during the first stage.

After completing the general tracking, we selected 58 articles for analysis. We categorized the data to gain information and to answer the three guiding questions. Table 2 summarizes the main subcategories that emerged from this process.

### Findings

#### English Teachers' Perceptions of Their Role as Agents of Change

Almost half the selected studies (26) found that participants were agents of change despite the structural

**Table 1.** Criteria for the Initial Stage of the Integrative Literature Review

| | |
|---|---|
| Year of publication | 2006–2023 |
| Type of document | Articles |
| Area | Social sciences (education) and applied linguistics |
| Author, countries, and affiliation | All |
| Language | English |
| Keywords | English teachers, teacher agency, social change, social competence |
| Databases | Scopus ($n = 42$) + Web of Science ($n = 35$) = 77 |
| Number of analyzed articles | 58 |

**Table 2.** Emerging Categories From the Three Guiding Questions (*N* = 58)

| Categories | Subcategories | *n* | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| English teachers' perceptions of their role as agents of change | Agents of change despite structural factors | 26 | 44.82 |
| | Positive attitudes and emotions toward agency | 18 | 31.03 |
| | English teachers as agents of change concerning their learners | 5 | 8.62 |
| | Resistance to the rules established by institutional power | 5 | 8.62 |
| | English teachers' perceptions of no agency | 4 | 6.89 |
| English teachers' practices to develop agency | English teachers' practices related to interactions with communities | 22 | 37.93 |
| | Humanistic approaches | 20 | 34.48 |
| | Literacy practices | 6 | 10.34 |
| | Teachers' freedom to implement practices and agency | 5 | 8.62 |
| | Translanguaging practices | 4 | 6.89 |
| | Use of technology[a] | 1 | 1.72 |
| English teachers' challenges for becoming agents of change | Collective agency | 19 | 32.75 |
| | English teachers' reflections on their practices | 18 | 31.03 |
| | Challenges related to students' realities and needs | 10 | 17.24 |
| | Language policies | 10 | 17.24 |
| | Challenges derived from students' negative attitudes[b] | 1 | 1.72 |

[a, b] Due to the limited number of studies that mention these topics, these two subcategories will not be explored during the analysis.

factors. Eighteen studies showed English language teachers as agents of change through their positive attitudes and emotions toward agency when teaching English. Five studies highlighted English teachers' perceptions of agency associated with learners. In another five, English teachers perceived their agency through a certain resistance to the rules established by institutional power. Finally, four studies showed that participants were unable to exert their agency. Next, we describe the five categories that emerged from this first guiding question.

**Agents of Change Despite Structural Factors**

As stated before, in 26 studies, English teachers considered themselves immersed in complex structural factors mediating between their identities and the contexts in which they asserted agency. Indeed, English teachers participating in those studies recognized that agency was formed through a constant interplay between individuals and structural factors such as external evaluations from parents and high-stakes test scores (Mesa Villa, 2017; Namgung et al., 2020). In relation to structural factors, Kayi-Aydar (2015) found

that English teachers' relations with their mentors and learners contributed to the participants' agency as providers of guidance and support. Additionally, teachers' agency was not activated by beliefs alone; other influential factors such as school culture, teachers' interactions with students, and colleagues' cooperation also influenced the teachers' perceptions as agents of change (Wang, 2022). In fact, Jiang et al. (2022) state that "agency is not isolated but is still the element that varies with social conditions" (p. 3).

Regarding some conclusions of the studies and how English teachers perceive their role as agents of change, it is noticeable that participants exercise their agency despite diverse classroom contexts, relational and structural factors, and conflicting positional identities. Indeed, agency is perceived by the teachers not as a singular activity but as a shared, relational, participative decision-making and contextual activity instead (van der Heijden, Beijaard, et al., 2018; Vandeyar, 2017; Wallen & Tormey, 2019). In a qualitative study conducted in public schools in Mississippi, Burnett (2011) claims that "for teacher educators, it seems critical to better understand both the local and social realities of language classrooms so that teachers may more broadly serve the communities in which they live and teach" (p. 4). Two studies (Kong et al., 2022; Mesa Villa, 2017) conclude that, despite the structural factors, English teachers actively implement their points of view and make decisions by themselves, which proves their role as agents of change.

### Positive Attitudes and Emotions Toward Agency

In 18 studies, English teachers' perceptions were associated with positive attitudes and emotions toward their role as agents of change. For instance, Limbada and Kajee (2020) and van der Heijden, Geldens, et al. (2015) assert that English teachers played a critical role in their learners' personal and academic growth and were focused on having a high impact on them.

In an interview-based case study of a language teacher agency from social justice, the interviewee demonstrated agency through favorable conditions at the institution as well as a good relationship with her students by changing her image from merely an instructor to an educator who taught life skills and respect to others (Leal & Crookes, 2018). Regarding some of those positive attitudes, Balyer and Özcan (2020) declared that "through their responsible and caring social behavior, teachers helped many students socially" (p. 7).

Concerning the main conclusions, English teachers recognize themselves as facilitators of social change in their communities despite the challenges, and they show positive improvements in transforming education by exercising agency (Fogle & Moser, 2017; Pillay, 2017). They also attempt to exercise their professional agency in the complexity of contexts and perceive it as part of their role in helping students adapt to changes. Furthermore, they focus mainly on the students' needs and well-being (Barahona & Toledo-Sandoval, 2022; Pantić, 2017).

Despite increasing difficulties, such as students' social realities and vulnerable conditions for developing agency, English teachers seek ways to construct affective bonds through confidence and empathy, encouraging them to actively support their students (Foley et al., 2022; Satyro, 2022). Emotional factors and positive attitudes toward learners are important for English teachers when they configure their identity as agents of change. Therefore, English teachers' agency develops through positive emotions such as enthusiasm, happiness, caring, and job satisfaction (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2018; Miller & Gkonou, 2018; Wu, 2022).

### English Teachers as Agents of Change in Relation to Their Learners

In five studies, English teachers highlighted perceptions of their agency associated with learners. Teachers can better exercise their agency when focused on their students (Leontjev & deBoer, 2022). It was fundamental "for teachers to assist and help learners convey their ideas in the target language, allowing them to feel more

confident to participate in class discussion" (Gómez Jiménez & Gutiérrez, 2019, p. 97). When promoting social competence through the exercise of agency, it is suitable for teachers to be more concerned about disadvantaged students (Cheung & Lee, 2009). Finally, Tumelius and Kuure (2022) found that when English teachers focus primarily on students to exert their agency, they can strengthen their professional vision and agency.

### Resistance to the Rules Established by Institutional Power

In five studies, English teachers perceived their agency through certain resistance to the rules established by institutional power. For instance, in a study conducted at a university in New York, Benesch (2018) asserts that the respondents' lack of obedience to educational policy changes in language teaching was an indicator of the educators' agency. A qualitative analysis of how teachers in some bilingual schools distributed their agency revealed that English teachers followed routines not aligned with the models chosen by the institutions. Furthermore, teachers constantly made decisions that shaped the character of their classes (Hurdus, 2023); that is, some resistance to the established rules seems necessary for teacher agency. Miranda and Valencia Giraldo (2019) suggest "a perspective on language education policies that approaches equity differently, acknowledging language diversity and not simply the quantity of outcomes, and envisions teachers as policymakers through their agency" (p. 283).

### English Teachers' Perceptions of No Agency

In a few studies (4), the participating English teachers doubted the idea of having the skills to develop their agency. For example, Ahmad and Shah (2022) reported that most participants felt unable to play an active role in pursuing their professional development goals and pathways. In a life history approach with a critical event focus in Iran, Mirzaee and Aliakbari

(2018) indicated that English teachers' agency was socially constructed and constrained, with no room for personal agency due to tensions with students, colleagues, and the institutions they worked for. In a phenomenological study aimed at exploring in-service English language teachers' agencies using technology, Yılmaz and Söğüt (2022) concluded that limited access to technology, the geographical location of the students, and unclear educational policies were hindrances to developing agency.

## English Teachers' Practices to Develop Agency

Twenty-two studies reported that participants developed practices by interacting with communities, students, and colleagues. In 20 studies, English teachers considered it significant to include humanistic approaches to develop agency. Six studies reported teachers' use of literacy practices to increase agency, and five found that agency could be fostered through activities related to teachers' freedom to implement practices. Translingual strategies to attend multilingual classes were also found in four studies as practices developed by English teachers. More detailed information on the emerged categories from this guiding question is provided below.

### Practices of English Teachers Related to Interactions With Communities

As said above, 22 articles reported that English teachers' practices toward their role as social agents were related to interactions with their communities, students, and colleagues. With regard to the main findings of the studies, Balyer and Özcan (2020), referring to their participants, affirmed that "when they noticed that certain students were regularly absent, they informed their principal and sometimes they visited the families to learn the reasons for the student being absent." (p. 6). Similarly, English teachers constructed their role mainly as social agents and educators by interacting with

students, families, colleagues, and other professionals (Fogle & Moser, 2017; Rodrigues & Duboc, 2022).

Regarding some of the major conclusions, some authors recognize that social practices such as interacting with communities, communicating teachers' necessities, and taking action to solve problems facilitate the development of teachers' agency and contribute to rethinking teachers' role as transformative members of their institutions. Furthermore, colleagues play a central role in helping the teacher work toward educational change (Hernández Varona & Gutiérrez-Álvarez, 2020; Mesa Villa, 2017; Rostami & Yousefi, 2020; Sierra-Piedrahita, 2018).

Undoubtedly, harmonious interactions with students, strong relations with coworkers, practices promoting collaborative work, teachers' attempts to create opportunities for students to help each other, and knowledge on meeting the needs of the communities really produce a positive sense of agency (Gómez-Vásquez & Guerrero Nieto, 2018; Robayo Acuña & Cárdenas, 2017; Wang, 2022).

### Humanistic Approaches

In 20 studies, English teachers exhibited humanistic approaches to develop agency. In a study in South Africa, Pillay (2017) found that the English teachers served as agents of change in the classrooms by respecting learners' identities and creating a democratic environment. In that way, teachers faced the difficulties and made a difference in the students' lives. In an interview-based case study by Leal and Crookes (2018), the language teacher exercised agency and involved the students in favorable conditions by encouraging them to discuss social constructs and voice their opinions. Similarly, "new teachers can and will advocate for diverse youth in classrooms and in ways that extend beyond the classroom into other school forums and to families and community" (Athanases & De Oliveira, 2008, p. 98).

In a South African study with the objective of exploring the best practices of an English teacher for meaningful education change, Vandeyar (2017) found that teaching involves supporting students, seeing the class as an act of human compassion, and viewing diversity as a great possibility for social change. Finally, agency was constructed by using humanistic and personal commitments that engaged students in an environment charged with affectivity, connection to the common well-being, and attention to students' diversity (Foley et al., 2022; Satyro, 2022; Sierra Piedrahita & Echeverri Sucerquia, 2020).

Considering some of the conclusions stated by the authors of the studies, English teachers might offer their students more inclusive and engaging content in class and support them in practicing values. Besides, teaching with the purpose of guiding learners for life is a great way of exhibiting agency (Cross, 2010; Kong et al., 2022).

### Literacy Practices

As mentioned before, in six studies, English teachers performed literacy practices to encourage agency. For instance, in a study aimed at applying a literacy activity as a social practice, Kepe and Linake (2019) found that through the use of extensive reading and the discursive construction of culture, students not only learned English but also obtained good knowledge of the cultures of those they interacted with. In line with this issue, when students were engaged in literacy practices, their English teachers were mindful of teaching as a social act and learned to work from a critical approach (Gómez Jiménez & Gutiérrez, 2019). According to Watson et al. (2022), "experiences of agency matter not just for teachers' professional identities and satisfaction, but also have a direct impact on how students experience literature" (p. 352). Finally, students would benefit more from agentive activities conducted by their teachers based on literacy activities around character education and literacy tasks that include reading and writing activities (Cheung & Lee, 2009; Ruan et al., 2020).

### Teachers' Freedom to Implement Practices and Agency

In five studies, English teachers were found to encourage agency through practices based on their own initiatives. Only in three of those studies did the participants confirm not having the skills to develop agency. Teachers' academic freedom to implement teaching methods and techniques revealed that they were unable to play an active role as agents of change due to the lack of professional development (Ahmad & Shah, 2022; Gao et al., 2022; Mirzaee & Aliakbari, 2018). On the other hand, two studies revealed that English teachers' freedom to implement practices could certainly foster the exercise of agency. Teachers intentionally managed their agency and practices through their own initiatives in a way that let them constantly make decisions to shape the character of their classes (Hurdus, 2023; van der Heijden, Beijaard et al., 2018).

### Translanguaging Practices

Four studies found that the participating English teachers struggled to develop a strong understanding of bilingualism and actively applied a framework of translingual pedagogy in daily teaching; in this way, teachers became active agents (Fu & Weng, 2023). Regarding multilingual classrooms, Song et al. (2022) highlight that "teachers' translanguaging practices in the classroom not only allow, but also encourage students' dynamic use of multiple languages in various formats" (p. 1). Additionally, Ishihara et al. (2018) declare that the use of translanguaging practices became a great tool for participants because it facilitated agency and allowed them to respond to change.

## English Teachers' Challenges for Becoming Agents of Change

The main challenges found in the reviewed studies include the inability to form collective agency (19), reflecting on teaching practices (18), students' realities and needs (10), and language policies (10).

### Collective Agency

In 19 studies, teachers' challenges were related to collective agency. Similarly, English teachers needed to consider how to construct a positive collaborative learning community, authentic collegial relationships, and strong support to obtain the effects of strong professional agency (Jiang et al., 2022). In a qualitative study conducted in South Korea to understand the professional agency of secondary English teachers, Namgung et al. (2020) highlighted that the "legitimacy of professional agency is particularly significant concerning the individual self, collegial relationship and the wider sociocultural environment" (p. 8).

In a case study carried out in Scotland that remarked collective agency as a challenge for English teachers, Pantić (2017) declares that teachers' participation in decision-making and working with other agents—including families, school colleagues, and other professionals—might be a real challenge for teachers to fulfill agency. Building connections with communities outside of the school and teachers working together in designing joint community service projects for the students are paramount challenges for English teachers' agency (Cruz-Arcila, 2020). Finally, there is a clear necessity for encouraging English teachers to advocate and promote work with communities in a way that they might also overcome the isolation of their work, increase opportunities to plan together and make decisions collectively when exercising agency (Leontjev & deBoer, 2022; Rodrigues & Duboc, 2022; Sierra-Piedrahita, 2018).

### English Teachers' Reflections on Their Practices

Eighteen studies linked English teachers' challenges to reflections on practices. All teachers could reflect on their teaching practices in order to change; at the same time, teacher-educators and all persons involved in the process of agency might be encouraged to see themselves as agents of change (Pillay, 2017). In line with those challenges, Nguyen and Ngo (2023) and Gao and Cui (2022) claim that English teachers must be

involved in reflective actions to address their sense of agency. Teachers with different pedagogical cognitions could also conduct peer reflections to empower their understanding of teachers' practices and agentic actions.

In addition, English teachers' agentive and reflective actions were essential to provide their students with more informative, inclusive, and engaging content, as well as to help them develop skills for the future; when teachers reflected on their practices, they made students' needs the priority and struggled to solve existing problems (Choi, 2022; Kong et al., 2022; Ruan et al., 2020). The challenges English teachers faced could be seen as reflections among the participants that allowed them to analyze social problems and recognize their own ability to act as agents of change (Hernández Varona & Gutiérrez Álvarez, 2020; Wallen & Tormey, 2019). Finally, "teacher training initiatives are encouraged to provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on how their social goals correspond with not only their experiences with students but also their own psychological well-being" (Chang et al., 2022, conclusion section).

### Challenges Related to Students' Realities and Needs

Ten studies revealed that English teachers' challenges were associated with understanding the students' needs and realities. For instance, in a study conducted at a university in California, Athanases and De Oliveira (2008) pointed out that the "teachers' acts of advocacy shared four crosscutting themes: a goal of equitable access to resources and support, convictions about equity, interceding on behalf of students in need, and engaging coadvocates" (p. 65). Similarly, teachers should understand the students' linguistic backgrounds and experiences and exercise agency actively (Kirsch, 2018). Taking the time to get to know and understand each individual in the class, creating an environment that allowed both teachers and learners to express their emotions and personal viewpoints with confidence,

and learning to listen mindfully to each other were challenges that English teachers faced during their practices as agents of change (Olivero, 2023; Vandeyar, 2017).

### Language Policies

Ten studies showed that English teachers' challenges corresponded to language policies. For example, a study aimed to analyze two teachers' stories about their agency in a university in Colombia reported that their challenges were basically related to policies that regarded them as simple instructors of English; thus, agency encompassed not only the teaching of a language but also a way for teachers to gain the power of teaching as a possibility for social change (Quintero-Polo et al., 2022). To overcome the constraints of policies, teachers made profound agentic changes by adapting the curriculum to create a space for reflection and foster autonomy in their classes (Wang, 2022). English teachers strived against the barriers posed by language policies: "Acting based on leading principles entails putting into practice the elimination of barriers—those which emerge from linguistic and educative policies as well as those which emerge from the inequality in social conditions" (Robayo Acuña & Cárdenas, 2017, p. 134). In a study centered on investigating teachers' agency development in a university in Saudi Arabia, whose results indicated that the participating English teachers were unable to develop their agency, Ahmad and Shah (2022) concluded that institutional goals and language policies should be more transparent and more aligned to students' real life because the existed curriculum was irrelevant and demotivating for students.

## Conclusions

This review sheds light on how agency is perceived by English teachers, their practices, and the challenges they face. As the reviewed studies show, English teachers have been developing sustained actions as agents of social change to impact their students' lives and

transform their way of seeing language not merely as a set of knowledge but as a way to develop skills in learners and to lead school transformation for the future.

This brief exploration of what English teachers perceive as agents of change has shown differences in how they face constraints but has also helped position language educators as dynamic agents in decision-making policies. This review paper corroborates the idea that English teachers' agency is partly a product of their context. However, by changing their environmental and structural circumstances, they can be creators of spaces of change (Bandura, 2000).

The reviewed studies show that English teachers can have two main stances. On the one hand, they can see the impact of positive attitudes and emotions when exerting agency. On the other hand, a small group of studies showed the participants doubting the idea of having skills to develop their agency. From the first stance, English teachers can act agentively through emotions, which are positioned as forming part of a sustainable agency. Miller and Gkonou (2018) state that each teacher interviewed in their study endeavored to make a great effort to create a beneficial classroom environment and positive relationships to achieve emotional rewards through understanding students better and being better understood by them. Thus, English teachers can facilitate agency by considering some affective factors and positive attitudes in the form of mindsets that allow meaningful engagement (Svalberg, 2018). As for the second stance, agency is not possible due to tensions with students, colleagues, and language requirements; the constant struggles experienced by teachers were manifested as "conflicting factors" which harm teachers' perceptions of their role as agents of change (Benesch, 2018; Torres-Rocha, 2017).

As for teaching practices, interactions with communities and using humanistic approaches also appeared to significantly impact English teachers' ability to act agentively. Palmer and Martínez (2013) claim that teachers can overcome the hegemonic discourses in classroom interactions when they know the power of working at the interactional level. Similarly, Varghese and Snyder (2018) conclude that English teachers demonstrate agency despite many constraints and challenges by maintaining strong connections and working willingly with students and their families. Agency development is considered to be activated when teachers interact with their communities, which allows them to identify contextual conditions and guide themselves toward taking further action (Hernández Varona & Gutiérrez Álvarez, 2020). Besides, the use of such humanistic approaches corroborates that English teachers consider themselves agents of change when they respect their learners and enable a democratic environment through the teaching of different cultures (Pillay, 2017).

Based on the review, we consider that teachers have to face significant challenges to impact the collective agency, such as language policies, which were noticeably less discussed in the reviewed studies. With regard to collective challenges, English teachers need to exercise agency through constant collaboration with others so that they can share concerns related to their contexts and look for desirable changes. Agentic actions also include activities beyond the classroom, such as being in contact with parents, assisting colleagues, and providing information for their students to include other peers without rejecting them for their differences (Haneda & Alexander, 2015). In any process aimed at developing agency, teachers should initiate a variety of agentic actions by collaborating with colleagues. Thus, constant interaction with others is a significant resource for English teachers to exercise their professional agency and overcome constraints due to structural and language policies.

Besides collective agency, reflection on teaching practices is another crucial issue. Teachers' reflections on their actions play a major part in better describing their intentional efforts to solve problems. Therefore, through positive attitudes, agentic attempts, and constant

reflection, the teachers exercise their agency in their contexts to overcome many constraints (Ruan et al., 2020). According to Cots and Nussbaum (1999), reflection is a tool to improve social competence; therefore, it should also be based on the learners' activities and thoughts. To achieve this, English teachers should support the students with meaningful tasks to solve contextualized problems.

Our synthesis also indicates that English teachers face challenges regarding students' realities and needs. Kirsch (2018) asserts that English language teachers can develop their agency when they place their students as the main actors of the learning process and when their purposes are focused on the learners' future. English teachers' agency occurs when they take the time to listen to their students and develop activities aimed to satisfy their specific needs and interests, which is aligned with the perspective of teaching a language from a humanistic perspective that allows English teachers to empower students and configure the classroom as a safe and welcoming place for learners.

One common issue is that, although challenged, English teachers' agentic actions are not dampened by structural factors or language policies. On the contrary, this review confirms the potential of English teachers to transform education in terms of their students, communities, and institutions.

An important observation is that agency emerges in contexts in which English teachers have a strong sense of belonging to the place they work for and are committed to implementing agentic actions through interactions and relationships with the members of their communities. However, further studies must involve parents, students, and other school and community personnel to gain greater insight into how teachers exercise agency in response to their contexts. Lastly, this study implies an urgent need to include the voices of English teachers in policy formulation from a critical awareness that recognizes the role of English educators as agents of change.

## References

Ahmad, H., & Shah, S. R. (2022). Teacher agency and professional development: A study on Cambridge English teacher program in the Arabian Gulf. *Cogent Education*, *9*(1), 2080352. https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2022.2080352

Athanases, S. Z., & De Oliveira, L. C. (2008). Advocacy for equity in classrooms and beyond: New teachers' challenges and responses. *Teachers College Record*, *110*(1), 64–104. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146810811000101

Bakadorova, O., & Raufelder, D. (2018). The essential role of the teacher–student relationship in students' need satisfaction during adolescence. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, *58*, 57–65. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2018.08.004

Balyer, A., & Özcan, K. (2020). Teachers' perceptions on their awareness of social roles and efforts to perform these roles. *South African Journal of Education*, *40*(2). https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v40n2a1723

Bandura, A. (2000). Exercise of human agency through collective efficacy. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *9*(3), 75–78. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8721.00064

Barahona, M., & Toledo-Sandoval, F. (2022). Exploring Chilean student teachers' development of teacher identity through Perezhivanie. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2022.2075875

Benesch, S. (2018). Emotions as agency: Feeling rules, emotion labor, and English language teachers' decision-making. *System*, *79*, 60–69. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2018.03.015

Burnett, J. (2011). Two case studies of secondary language teaching: A critical look at the intersection of management and the local and social realities that shape our classrooms. *The Modern Language Journal*, *95*(1), 4–26. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2011.01240.x

Chang, C.-F., Hall, N. C., & Horrocks, P. T. M. (2022). Exploring teachers' social goal orientations with the job demands-resources model. *Current Psychology*, 42, 24326–24338. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03570-5

Cheung, C., & Lee, T. (2009). Improving social competence through character education. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, *33*(3), 255–263. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2009.08.0063

Choi, J. (2022). The interplay of teacher identities and agency: A case study of two native English-speaking teachers in South Korea. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *117*, 103804. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103804

Cots, J. M., & Nussbaum, L. (1999). Schooling, language and teachers: Language awareness and the discourse of the educational reform in Catalonia. *Language Awareness*, *8*(3–4), 174–189. https://doi.org/10.1080/09658419908667127

Cross, R. (2010). Language teaching as sociocultural activity: Rethinking language teacher practice. *The Modern Language Journal*, *94*(3), 434–452. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2010.01058.x

Cruz-Arcila, F. (2020). Rural English language teacher identities: Alternative narratives of professional success. *Íkala, Revista de Lenguaje y Cultura*, *25*(2), 435–453. https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.ikala.v25n02a05

Flynn, N., & Curdt-Christiansen, X. L. (2018). Intentions versus enactment: Making sense of policy and practice for teaching English as an additional language. *Language and Education*, *32*(5), 410–427. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2018.1475484

Fogle, L. W., & Moser, K. (2017). Language teacher identities in the Southern United States: Transforming rural schools. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, *16*(2), 65–79. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2016.1277147

Foley, Y., Anderson, C., Hancock, J., & Conteh, J. (2022). Exploring the professional identity and agency of student teachers in multilingual classrooms. *Language and Education*, *36*(2), 106–121. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2021.1991369

Fu, Y., & Weng, Z. (2023). Examining ESL and bilingual teachers' agency after NCLB: Expanding the ecological perspective. *International Multilingual Research Journal*, *17*(3), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/19313152.2023.2201090

Gao, Y., & Cui, Y. (2022). English as a foreign language teachers' pedagogical belief about teacher roles and their agentic actions amid and after COVID-19: A case study. *RELC Journal*, *55*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/00336882221074110

Gao, J., Xu, Y., Kitto, E., Bradford, H., & Brooks, C. (2022). Promoting culturally sensitive teacher agency in Chinese kindergarten teachers: An integrated learning approach. *Early Years*, *42*(1), 55–70. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2021.1901661

Gómez Jiménez, M. C., & Gutiérrez, C. P. (2019). Engaging English as a foreign language student in critical literacy practices: The case of a teacher at a private university. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, *21*(1), 91–105. https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v21n1.71378

Gómez-Vásquez, L. Y., & Guerrero Nieto, C. H. (2018). Non-native English-speaking teachers' subjectivities and Colombian language policies: A narrative study. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, *20*(2), 51–64. https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v20n2.67720

Haneda, M., & Alexander, M. (2015). ESL teacher advocacy beyond the classroom. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *49*, 149–158. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2015.03.009

Hernández Varona, W., & Gutiérrez Álvarez, D. F. (2020). English language student-teachers developing agency through community-based pedagogy projects. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, *22*(1), 109–122. https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v22n1.76925

Hurdus, J. (2023). The relational actor: How teachers in bilingual schools distribute their political agency. *Linguistics and Education*, *74*, 101152. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2023.101152

Ishihara, N., Carroll, S. K., Mahler, D., & Russo, A. (2018). Finding a niche in teaching English in Japan: Translingual practice and teacher agency. *System*, *79*, 81–90. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2018.06.006

Jiang, Y., Li, J., & Wang, Q. (2022). An ecological approach to understanding university English teachers' professional agency in implementing formative assessment. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.916980

Kayi-Aydar, H. (2015). Teacher agency, positioning, and English language learners: Voices of pre-service classroom

teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *45*, 94–103. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.09.009

Kepe, M. H., & Linake, M. A. (2019). Teaching English as a social practice: A practical guide. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, *33*(5), 146–168. https://doi.org/10.20853/33-5-3600

Kirsch, C. (2018). Dynamic interplay of language policies, beliefs and pedagogy in a preschool in Luxembourg. *Language and Education*, *32*(5), 444–461. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2018.1487452

Kong, D., Zou, M., & Chen, J. (2022). English as a foreign language teacher engagement with culturally responsive teaching in rural schools: Insights from China. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.990363

Leal, P., & Crookes, G. V. (2018). "Most of my students kept saying, 'I never met a gay person'": A queer English language teacher's agency for social justice. *System*, *79*, 38–48. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2018.06.005

Leijen, Ä., Pedaste, M., & Lepp, L. (2020). Teacher agency following the ecological model: How it is achieved and how it could be strengthened by different types of reflection. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, *68*(3), 295–310. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2019.1672855

Leontjev, D., & deBoer, M. (2022). Teacher as creator: Orchestrating the learning environment to promote learner development. *Language Teaching Research*, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688221117654

Limbada, Z., & Kajee, L. (2020). Teacher narratives of social (in)justice: Early experiences shaping pedagogy. *International Conference on Multidisciplinary Research*, 84–97. https://doi.org/10.26803/MyRes.2020.07

Liu, Y., Wang, H., & Zhao, R. (2020). Teacher agency and spaces in changes of English language education Policy. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, *21*(5), 548–566. https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2020.1791532

Mesa Villa, C. P. (2017). The socialization of a novice teacher of English: Becoming an agent of change. *How Journal*, *24*(1), 83–100. https://doi.org/10.19183/how.24.1.318

Miller, E. R., & Gkonou, C. (2018). Language teacher agency, emotion labor and emotional rewards in tertiary-level English language programs. *System*, *79*, 49–59. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2018.03.002

Miranda, N., & Valencia Giraldo, S. (2019). Unsettling the 'challenge': ELT policy ideology and the new breach amongst state-funded schools in Colombia. *Changing English*, *26*(3), 282–294. https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2019.1590144

Mirzaee, A., & Aliakbari, M. (2018). "They now respect me and send me to the best schools!": Identity construction of an Iranian EFL teacher. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, *15*(1), 21–42. https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2017.1327794

Namgung, W., Moate, J., & Ruohotie-Lyhty, M. (2020). Investigating the professional agency of secondary school English teachers in South Korea. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, *5*. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-020-00083-1

Nguyen, M. H., & Ngo, X. M. (2023). An activity theory perspective on Vietnamese preservice English teachers' identity construction in relation to tensions, emotion and agency. *Language Teaching Research*. https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688221151046

Olivero, M. M. (2023). Teaching English in challenging situations: Interviews with those in the trenches. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2023.2171046

Palmer, D., & Martínez, R. A. (2013). Teacher agency in bilingual spaces: A fresh look at preparing teachers to educate Latina/o bilingual children. *Review of Research in Education*, *37*(1), 269–297. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X12463556

Pantić, N. (2017). An exploratory study of teacher agency for social justice. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *66*, 219–230. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.04.008

Pillay, A. (2017). How teachers of English in South African schools recognize their change agency. *South African Journal of Education*, *37*(3), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v37n3a1296

Quintero-Polo, Á., Duarte-González, C., & León-Castro, A. (2022). Identity as a source of agency for transformative English language teachers. *Educación y Humanismo*, *24*(43), 110–128. https://doi.org/10.17081/eduhum.24.43.5758

Robayo Acuña, L. M., & Cárdenas, M. L. (2017). Inclusive education and ELT policies in Colombia: Views from some Profile journal authors. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, *19*(1), 121–136. https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v19n1.61075

Rodrigues, L. A. D., & Duboc, A. P. (2022). Student teachers' knowledge production processes within socially just educational principles and practices in Brazil. *Teachers and Teaching*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2022.2062719

Rostami, F., & Yousefi, M. H. (2020). Iranian novice English teachers' agency construction: The complexity dynamic/system perspective. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, *5*. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-020-00082-2

Ruan, X., Zheng, X., & Toom, A. (2020). From perceived discrepancies to intentional efforts: Understanding English department teachers' agency in classroom instruction in a changing curricular landscape. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *92*, 103074. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103074

Ruiz Ortega, F. J. (2022). Emociones epistémicas en la enseñanza de la argumentación en ciencias. *Revista Brasileira de Pesquisa em Educação em Ciências*, e39184. https://doi.org/10.28976/1984-2686rbpec2022u11671185

Satyro, D. (2022). Affectivity and agency in English teaching for youth and adult education. *Revista Brasileira de Lingüística Aplicada*, *22*(1), 94–124. https://doi.org/10.1590/1984-6398202218360

Sierra-Piedrahita, A. M. (2018). Changing teaching practices: The impact of a professional development program on an English language teacher. *Íkala, Revista de Lenguaje y Cultura*, *23*(1), 101–121. https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.ikala.v23n01a08

Sierra Piedrahita, A. M., & Echeverri Sucerquia, P. A. (2020). Governmental professional development initiatives for the implementation of language policies and curriculum guidelines: Secondary school teachers' experiences, challenges and views. *Íkala, Revista de Lenguaje y Cultura*, *25*(1), 137–152. https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.ikala.v25n01a13

Song, J., Howard, D., & Olazabal-Arias, W. (2022). Translanguaging as a strategy for supporting multilingual learners' social emotional learning. *Education Sciences*, *12*(7), 475. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12070475

Svalberg, A. M. L. (2018). Researching language engagement: Current trends and future directions. *Language Awareness*, *27*(1–2), 21–39. https://doi.org/10.1080/09658416.2017.1406490

Tarnanen, M., & Palviainen, Å. (2018). Finnish teachers as policy agents in a changing society. *Language and Education*, *32*(5), 428–443. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2018.1490747

Torres-Rocha, J. C. (2017). High school EFL teachers' identity and their emotions towards language requirements. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, *19*(2), 41–55. https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v19n2.60220

Tumelius, R., & Kuure, L. (2022). Pre-service teachers' professional vision and agency emerging in orchestrating language learning in a hybrid space. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2022.2092154

van der Heijden, H. R. M. A., Beijaard, D., Geldens, J. J. M., & Popeijus, H. L. (2018). Understanding teachers as change agents: An investigation of primary school teachers' self-perception. *Journal of Educational Change*, *19*, 347–373. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-018-9320-9

van der Heijden, H. R. M. A., Geldens, J. J. M., Beijaard, D., & Popeijus, H. L. (2015). Characteristics of teachers as change agents. *Teachers and Teaching*, *21*(6), 681–699. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2015.1044328

Vandeyar, S. (2017). The teacher as an agent of meaningful educational change. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice*, *17*, 373–393.

Varghese, M. M., & Snyder, R. (2018). Critically examining the agency and professional identity development of novice dual language teachers through figured worlds. *International Multilingual Research Journal*, *12*(3), 145–159. https://doi.org/10.1080/19313152.2018.1474060

Wallen, M., & Tormey, R. (2019). Developing teacher agency through dialogue. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *82*, 129–139. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.03.014

Wang, L. (2022). English language teacher agency in response to curriculum reform in China: An ecological approach. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.935038

Watson, A., Kelly, L., Foley, J., Kneen, J., Chapman, S., Smith, L., & Thomas, H. (2022). Teacher agency in the selection of literary texts. *English in Education*, *56*(4), 340–356. https://doi.org/10.1080/04250494.2022.2085550

Weng, Z., Zhu, J., & Kim, G. J. Y. (2019). English language teacher agency in classroom-based empirical studies: A research synthesis. *TESOL International Journal*, *14*(1), 37–61. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1244103

Wu, X. (2022). A longitudinal study of EFL teacher agency and sustainable identity development: A positioning theory perspective. *Sustainability*, *15*(1), 48. https://doi.org/10.3390/su15010048

Yılmaz, A., & Söğüt, S. (2022). Language education for social justice: Reproductions or disruptions through technology. *Computers & Education*, *187*, 104535. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2022.104535

## About the Authors

**Lina Betancurt** is a doctoral candidate in Education (Universidad de Caldas, Colombia). She holds an MA in Didactics of English and is an English teacher at I.E. Técnica Alfonso López (Colombia). Her research interests lie in developing critical reading and language awareness.

**Liliana del Pilar Gallego** holds a PhD in Psychology of Education from Universidad de Barcelona (Spain), one MA in Cognitive Sciences and Language, and another in Applied Linguistics to the Teaching of English (Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, Colombia). She is a professor at Universidad de Caldas and coordinates one research group there. Her interests are in ELT and identity.